

PROBLEM OF THE AMERICAN TRAMP

HOW SHALL VAGRANCY EVIL BE CHECKED?

Laws of Various States Have Proved Unequal to the Task—Elaborate System for the Cure of Habitual Idleness in Force on the Continent of Europe—Is Striking Contrast to the Futile Efforts That Have Been Made Here in the United States.

NEW YORK.—The course of the vagrant's life is in a vicious circle. Street, park bench, cheap lodging house, court, jail, street, brake-beam, court, jail, etc.; so it goes, from month to month, from hand to mouth, from city to city. More accurately stated, the vagrant's course is spiral and downward, with accelerated momentum toward demoralization, disease and death. Along his road are certain "rescue stations"—charitable societies, missions, curbstone breadlines, industrial homes, personal visitations in alcoholic wards. These are efforts to extend the helping hand, to switch the vagrant from the circular track to the "straight ahead line." But generally the momentum is too great. Failures are recorded far in excess of even imagined successes writes O. F. Lewis of the Charity Organization society in the New York Times.

When we seek, by imprisonment, to deal with the individual "vag," what do we find? Generally ineffective, inadequate, unjust methods of punishment, so futile as to be ridiculous, were they not so tragic. We find correctional methods in jail that, instead of correcting, debase, methods as vagrant as are the prisoners. We believe that each man who is able should contribute his share of the day's work. Nature abhors a vacuum, and the community in general abhors the constitutional idler. If the drone work not, neither shall he eat. We believe that crime should be punished. Vagrancy is a crime under the law. Punishment is generally and necessarily effected by the restraint of liberty, within a penal institution. Vagrants are imprisoned generally in jails or workhouses.

But how? What are the conditions of American jails? Do they check vagrancy? Do they punish justly? Do they reform?

AN ANSWER has recently been made public which is a scathing arraignment of conditions in a great majority of American county jails, all the more scathing and staggering because made after a careful investigation by a committee of the National Prison Congress, which does not seek sensationalism. The following paragraphs are almost random quotations from the report:

"If the only or chief purpose of jails were to keep wild beasts in cages, most of the jails are well enough adapted for this purpose. . . . The customary mode of serving food is revolting, demoralizing and often dangerous to health. . . . Often we must imagine bunk over bunk, in the same cell or cage, crowded until the horrors of stench or suffocation are indescribable. . . . Under an open jail system the filthiest, vilest prisoner punishes or tortures those who have not yet sunk to his level. . . . The very struc-

"In Birmingham, Ala., 240 men in 72 cells; 25 women in ten cells. . . . The inmates of jails are chiefly of two classes—those awaiting trial and convicted misdemeanants. . . . The ordinary term of convicted misdemeanants, vagrants and inebriates is too short for any sort of industrial training or systematic production. A careful study of the situation in all parts of the land has long ago driven many to the conclusion that we must have district labor colonies or workhouses for those convicted of offenses, and that the term of degenerates must be at least two years, if we really intend to fit them for useful lives."

THE committee plainly shows that under present conditions and laws the county jail must provide for males and females; children, youth and adults; first offenders, habitual criminals, vagabonds, prostitutes; witnesses held for their testimony; poor debtors whose crime is their poverty; idiots, imbeciles, insane, epileptics, persons arrested on suspicion, and apoplectics whom the sapient policeman could not distinguish from drunkards. All these, says the report, are often under one roof and management, in a building so built that cries and whispers travel along a corridor with cages open at the side.

Now, what chance is there in the average jail for the reformation of the imprisoned vagrant? We may think that Jack London draws the long bow in his picturesque descriptions of life on the road, but in his tale of imprisonment in the Erie county jail he never wrote of such horrifying conditions as are described by the report of the committee, of which Prof. Charles R. Henderson of the University of Chicago was chairman. What chance, above all, has the detained witness or suspect, held in the jail for his testimony, and innocent before the law until he is proven guilty? What chance has he of not suffering contamination and gaining a hatred of society that will not die? In many county jails the only exercise "enjoyed" by the prisoners is in a common large room, with steel grating separating it from the surrounding corridors, and called in jail parlance the "bull pen."

ARE we not then in a wretched dilemma, we who urge that the vagrant receive treatment that will deter and reform? Shall we, knowing jail conditions, allow him to roam at large? But the vagrant habit is fostered by idleness, mendicancy and the absence of prosecution. Even as it is, the unwillingness of many police officials or magistrates to prosecute tramps is well known. When the vagrant is told to "get out of town or be run in" he of course decamps, and the town finances are spared, while the neighboring community receives the shifted burden. Yet if the convicted vagrant is sent to jail he becomes a source of contamination to

instances to the penitentiary. Boston, Lowell and other Massachusetts towns report sending some vagrants to the state farm, where there is a nine months' sentence. In these jails and workhouses the labor required, when there is any, consists generally of breaking stone in quarry or in jail-yard, roadmaking, chaircaning, chair-making and farm work. This work is "on paper." There is little or no effort made to bring reformatory influences to bear on those serving short sentences or to teach a trade. Even at the Massachusetts state farm, where the workhouse conditions are far better than in most correctional institutions where misdemeanants of the vagrant or inebriate class are confined, the industries maintained seem to be far more largely carried on as sentences than as chances to earn a living.

MANY of the cities use the Bertillon system of identification measurements. One chief reports asking the "usual questions," another the "name and address"—as though a vagrant's name and address would be of value! What a contrast is this to the elaborate Belgian system for the identification of vagrants, which centers in the "casier centrale de vagabondage," a general identification bureau at Brussels? In Belgium the process of trying an arrested vagrant is speedy and thorough. As soon as the police arrest a vagrant they communicate by telegraph with Brussels. Within a few hours there is sent back from Brussels by telegraph a full description of the vagrant and of his previous career, if anything of the prisoner is on record. On the following morning the magistrate, who is a graduate of the university, has before him sufficient material about this particular vagrant

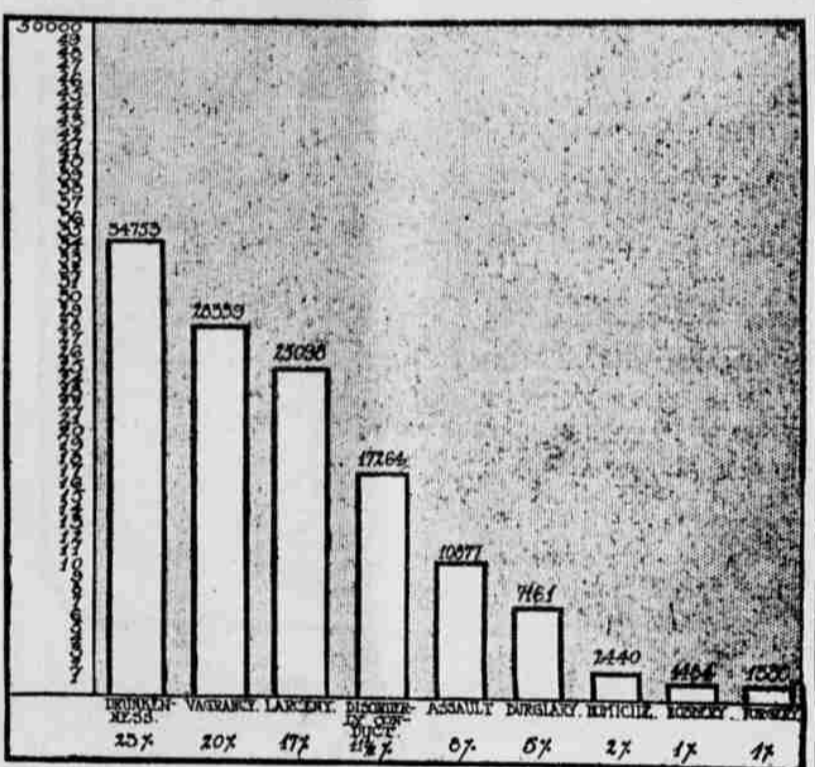
ed vagrant is sent to a maison de refuge, which, besides acting as a kind of almshouse for the aged and handicapped, serves somewhat as do the voluntary colonies of Germany for those wanderers who at the time of their coming within the law are unfit through ignorance, illness or inefficiency to make their living.

Thirdly, Belgium does not expect that any large proportion of its vagrant population will be reformed. Most of the vagrants at Merxplas are recidivists, repeaters, who have reached their present position through drink.

Fourthly, Belgium believes that vagrancy, being a social disease developed through months and years, cannot be cured by 30 days of idleness in a demoralizing jail. The average term of detention is 16 months, long enough to effect a considerable cure, if cure is possible.

In Germany and in Switzerland the treatment of the habitual vagrant is similar to that prevailing in Belgium. There are 24 compulsory labor colonies in Germany, the average length of sentence being one year. Numerous industries are carried on and the cost is comparatively small. These workhouses have diminished vagrancy, while the 34 voluntary labor colonies, accommodating nearly 4,000 persons, show no evidence of any substantial improvement resulting from the time spent in the colonies. In Switzerland there are several compulsory colonies, the sentences being from six months to two years.

THE Swiss colony of Witzwil, which Mr. Edmond Kelly has recently described in detail in his book on "The Elimination of the Tramp," shows that in a certain proportion of cases the inmates committed to a compulsory



PRISONERS COMMITTED IN THE UNITED STATES DURING 1904. The table classifies the principal offenses, showing total number of sentences for each offense and percentage of each class of offenses to total number of sentences, 149,691.

to enable him to form an adequate judgment of the case.

Coupled with this carefulness and completeness of investigation, registration, and adequacy of judgment is the Belgian system for the punishment of vagrants, which differs so essentially from our opportunist methods as to be staggering at first to contemplate. We "bunch" our vagrants in law. In New York state the man with no money, no work, and no visible means of support is a vagrant. That such a man is not often jailed, unless the case is aggravated by other factors, is not the fault of the law, so to speak, but is due to the unwillingness of magistrates to commit the unemployed homeless, or to the indifference of the authorities. But in Belgium the state of "no work, no home, no money" is not a crime, unless there is added to that the state of intentional idleness.

BUT when Belgium does commit a vagrant, then woe to the liberty of that vagrant for a long period! Conviction is to a depot de mendicite for from two to seven years. The depot de mendicite is at Merxplas, a great industrial colony with accommodations for about 5,000 prisoners. Here there occurs a classification, the worst elements being at night placed in solitary confinement and otherwise placed under strict discipline. Intensive labor is carried on, the work being graded according to the physical ability of the individual inmates.

The Belgian treatment of vagrants brings out prominently several facts. In the first place, Belgium believes in getting vagrants off the streets and highways. Some years ago the minister of justice declared that there was no vagabondage in Belgium. This statement needs interpreting. There is probably fairly little vagrancy along the highways, because every vagrant must be apprehended and made to show cause through his papers, or by the absence of a record at Brussels, why he should not be sent to the depot de mendicite. The fact that Merxplas contains about 5,000 inmates, and that the average period of detention is 18 months, and that the majority of the inmates are returned to Merxplas for succeeding offenses of vagrancy, shows that vagrancy in Belgium is not eradicated from the social body, but removed as much as possible from society.

SECONDLY, Belgium does not regard all vagrants alike. If there are extenuating circumstances, or if the case of vagrancy seems the result of physical incapacity, the apprehend-

labor colony do not reform and rejoin the ranks of the industrial army. A trained English investigator stated recently, regarding Witzwil, that there is no doubt that the fact of having worked hard for a year or 18 months makes a man apt to get into the habit of working, and this is believed to be the actual result in Switzerland.

What, then, shall we say regarding the treatment of vagrancy in the United States? First, that at present it is thoroughly inadequate. As statistics and the accompanying diagrams show, 67 per cent. of the commitments to penal institutions are to county jails and workhouses in which the conditions are often exceptionally bad. Drunkenness, vagrancy and disorderly conduct were responsible for more than half the commitments during 1904 to penal institutions in the United States. For these three offenses the county jails and workhouses, to which the large majority of offenders are committed, offer practically no reformatory influences. For more serious crimes, such as burglary, robbery, assault, forgery, etc., there are reformatories and state prisons, in which latter institutions some reformatory influence is felt.

THE sentences for vagrancy are in over 90 per cent. of the cases for six months or less, and the largest percentage of commitments is shown to be for less than one month. No cure for vagrancy can be had under such conditions. New York state leads all other states of our country in the number of its commitments for vagrancy. The burden of vagrancy in the United States was represented in 1904 by over 28,000 commitments, being about 20 per cent. of all commitments to penal institutions during that year.

This brief resume of the present conditions inevitably points to the necessity of a material change in our system of combating vagrancy. In this connection it is of special interest that within recent months a bill has been drafted in New York state providing for the establishment of a farm colony upon lines very similar to that of the Swiss compulsory colony, Witzwil. This bill, which has the approval of the leading charitable societies of New York city and of several trunk lines terminating in New York, and which will be introduced into the next legislature, provides for the establishment in New York state of a compulsory labor colony, with intermediate sentence, regular labor, reformatory influences and classification of prisoners.

CHILDREN WITHOUT SCHOOL.

Five Live on Island in Ocean Off Massachusetts Coast.

Boston.—Alone on an island in the ocean, with five children to educate, is the predicament in which the supreme court's decision leaves Henry B. Davis, the sole resident of "No Man's Land."

This little island lies four miles south of Martha's Vineyard. It is included in the town of Chilmark, and Mr. Davis pays taxes on property assessed at \$7,000.

In 1904 he moved to the island. His children are 4, 12, 17, 19 and 24 years old. The 12-year-old child is the only one of whom attendance at school is legally required.

In its decision the court regretted that the children should go uneducated, but stated that the petitioner cannot expect the town to furnish and maintain a school for his sole benefit.

Had Mr. Davis' petition been granted, he would likely have had the contract for erecting the school building. One of the scholars would have been appointed janitor, and when a graduate of the school became teacher the educational short circuit would have been complete. In the town of Chilmark there are several school buildings and a library.

In answer to Mr. Davis' petition the court said: "The situation of the petitioner and his children is an unfortunate one. The statute requires him to cause at least one of them to attend school; he pays taxes to the town to a considerable amount; there are no regular means of communication between the island upon which he has fixed his residence and the main island upon which the public schools of the town are situated; communication is often difficult and sometimes impossible. But we can pass only upon the question of law raised by the report. Petition dismissed."

MAN BUYS WOMEN'S GLOVES.

And Wears Them—Surprise for Girl at Glove Counter.

New York.—He sat at the women's glove counter in the department store waiting patiently until the struggling women buyers would release a saleswoman. Finally one came to him.

"I want a pair of tan gloves," he said.

"For yourself?" the girl inquired.

"Certainly," he said.

"Gents' gloves third counter to the right," she announced.

"I know that," said the man, "but please won't you let me buy them here? You see, I've got a small hand and I can get a much better fit in women's gloves."

"Certainly," said the salesgirl, and she brought out gloves and gloves until she found what he wanted.

"We never had a man buy his gloves at this counter before," she said in the intervals of trying on, "but I'm sure I don't see why more men don't buy women's gloves. You can do ever so much better in the small sizes, seven or under. Now, there you have a perfect fitting glove, and I know they don't keep them that small at the gents' counter here."

"I learned the trick a long while ago," said the man as he waited for his change. "A young woman suggested it. She was a sensible girl, and if there were more like her you would do a big business with men here."

LOCK OF HAIR IS ESTATE.

Hamilton (O.) County Enriched That Much by Coroner.

Cincinnati.—Coroner Cameron turned over to the county treasurer \$158.33 unclaimed money found among the effects of deceased persons from June 1, 1904, to June 1, 1907. Besides the money, several bushels of trinkets were turned over to Probate Court Judge Malsbury, who will administer the various estates, sell the valuables and turn the money over to the county treasurer.

The property the probate court will be asked to dispose of is worth probably several hundred dollars. The smallest estate consists of a lock of hair which was found on the body of an unknown white woman. Two headache powders comprise another estate. There is one diamond ring of value found on an unknown body and several watches are of considerable value. Eight estates consist of seven cents. In all there were about 200 cases.

George Belouche, whose brutal murder aroused all of Cincinnati in October of 1905, was one of those whose relatives never claimed his effects. Belouche was killed by thieves and a red-hot poker was run through his body at his home on Walnut Hills. Ten dollars in gold and five cents were found in his clothing. It is supposed the murderers overlooked this money, as the motive of the crime was said by the police to have been robbery.

He Straddled State Line.

Cumberland, Md.—Frank Nickola of Garrett county, who had a saloon on the Maryland-Pennsylvania state line, and who was wanted by both states for selling liquor without a license, pleaded guilty at Oakland, Md., and was fined \$200.

Nickola evaded arrest by going on the Pennsylvania side whenever the Maryland authorities wanted him, and to the Maryland side when the Pennsylvania officers looked in.

Last February officers of both states went to his place, and when the Pennsylvania officers stepped inside Nickola went over to the Maryland side, only to be arrested by a Maryland officer.



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